



Germany and the World of Yesterday

Leon Mangasarian



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Stefan Zweig lays bare what Europe lost in two world wars, revolutions and Nazism at the start of his elegiac *The World of Yesterday*.

“When I attempt to find a simple formula for the period in which I grew up, prior to the First World War, I hope that I convey its fullness by calling it the Golden Age of Security,” Zweig wrote.

His pre-1914 Europe’s set-in-stone permanence was swept away in just 28 years. The book, completed in 1942, was an extended suicide note he mailed to his publisher before he and his wife took their lives.¹

Security is the be all and end all—no matter how much cynical, post-everythings take a jackhammer to reason, understanding and power. A glance at the metrics of states suffering chronic insecurity shows the horrendous cost. Without security there is not only no prosperity;² there is almost nothing.

Germans may look back on their Golden Age of Security as starting with the 1949 founding of the Federal Republic and ending in the ugly conglomeration of the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia, Russia’s 2014 seizure of Crimea/war on Ukraine and Donald Trump’s 2016 election.

During these roughly six decades, the four pillars of Germany’s post-World War II security model were built and expanded: NATO, the European Union, trans-Atlanticism and free trade. This gave Germans their longest period of peace, making them fantastically rich as the world’s fourth biggest economy.

Today, all four pillars are wobbling and weakened. A Golden Age of Security is in danger of slipping away yet most Germans remain in a state of denial, convinced the riches of the post-war era are the natural world order and that their holiday from history will go on forever. Too many Germans cling to the model of “Germany as a big Switzerland.”

Simplified to the point, (and I write this with sorrow as someone who lives in and loves Germany) this Germany-as-Switzerland-on-steroids ideal says: Let us have our peace and quiet, let us earn lots of money, let us use the world as our oyster for vacations but spare us tough decisions on national security, geopolitics and war so we can stay on our moral high horse. “The great model of strategic dwarfism,” is the acerbic conclusion of Josef Joffe.³

Sure, this German attitude is benign compared to the past four years of Trump, who’s done more damage to NATO and US-European ties than any alliance friend or foe. Former US National Security Adviser John Bolton’s memoirs show how terrifyingly close Trump came to quitting NATO. A Trump re-election would have meant, if not a formal NATO exit, a slow-motion alliance train wreck.

But let’s not kid ourselves. Joe Biden’s victory gives Europe some breathing space but not much. The biggest danger under President Biden is that Germans will say, ‘Wunderbar! We don’t have to spend more on guns!’ Indeed, just days after Biden was declared the winner, some Social Democrats, the junior partner in Chancellor Angela Merkel’s government, demanded

things like “decoupling” the EU from the US, no rise in German military spending and blocking armed drones for the Bundeswehr.⁴ Biden may be more diplomatic than Trump yet he’ll expect Germany do far more. He’s likely to stand tough on China and expand Barack Obama’s pivot of US armed forces and diplomatic focus to the Indo-Pacific.

Despite their victories in 2020, Democrats cannot count on an opponent as unpopular as President Trump, or on a devastating pandemic to support their electoral chances in 2024. Though Trump is out of office, Trumpism is alive and well.⁵ In four years, it might be the same old policies, minus the late-night Tweeting and a candidate who doesn’t brag about grabbing women by their genitals.⁶ President Nikki Haley, anyone?

So, it would be fatal for Germans just to focus on Biden. Berlin must do its utmost to make German-American ties “Republican-proof”⁷ so that any nativist-nationalist GOP return to the White House doesn’t become a Trump redux.

This is where Germany has a big challenge with the US

Trump’s vulgarity shouldn’t deflect from the German failure to meet NATO’s 2 percent of GDP defence spending target, backed by Berlin in 2014 (or, more important, boosting actual military capabilities). Trump is by far not the only inhabitant of the White House to grumble about Europe shirking its military duties. Barack Obama dubbed European NATO allies “free riders” and we can go back to 1961 to find Dwight Eisenhower warning the incoming John F. Kennedy that the US balance of payments

problem should be addressed by making NATO allies pay more for their defence.⁸ Kennedy went on to complain about Europeans not doing their share and “living off the fat of the land.”⁹

Even in the best of worlds, there’s going to be less America in Europe. Maybe a lot less. In a worst case, no US security guarantee for Europe means the end of NATO as we know it because 75 percent of all NATO capabilities come from Washington.¹⁰

Aside from US military hardware, let’s be clear about how crucial trans-Atlanticism is for Germany and Europe. American soldiers fought their way into Europe in two world wars. The US has been a European power since 1941. America supported European unification after the war, in part politically but also because the US military presence drained old rivalries and enmity among European nations. It’s easily forgotten that US support for the 1990 German reunification helped overcome British and French opposition. Now, as the US departs, some of this old, intra-European mistrust is seeping back.

Yet the idea of truly producing, rather than just consuming security, remains alien to most Germans, even as it was underlined in two remarkable speeches by German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer.¹¹ Why is this? In a book, written with Jan Techau,¹² we argue this stems from Germany’s “strategic frivolity.” It’s rooted in the trauma of Germany’s moral bankruptcy under the Nazis, with the Holocaust as its nadir, followed by 45 years of occupation and division under which Germans had limited say in their own, let alone European security.

The result is a country that has lost the ability and even the language to address and think about power, national interest and geostrategy in a sober, analytical manner. When such things are discussed by Germans the tone is too often agitated, shrill and hyper-moralistic.

Strategic frivolity is undermining Germany’s pillars of security and prosperity: NATO, the EU, trans-Atlantic ties and trade.

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What are these frivolities and their consequences? Here are just a few:

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- A failure to understand that the past 75 years of peace in Europe is an anomaly that contrasts with the past millennium in which Europe was dominated by war. Germans gloss over that Europe's fringes are being made safe again for territorial conquest as with Azerbaijan, aided by Turkey, routing Armenian forces (Where was Europe when Turkey and Russia redrew the borders?¹³) or Russia with its land grabs in Georgia and Ukraine. Stuck in a shibboleth of being a “civilian power” where “nationalism and heroism are verboten and ‘leave me out’ is the best part of valour,”¹⁴ Germans express horror at the idea that to keep the peace you must be ready to fight and die for it.
- Germany's military isn't treated as a linchpin of the nation. With its legendary planes and helicopters that can't fly and submarines that can't go to sea, the Bundeswehr, wrecked by decades of underspending, probably couldn't even defend Germany, let alone other NATO members.¹⁵ In the US, this would be political suicide. But in Germany there are no votes to be won for more military spending. Telling German Friday for Future climate activists that their nation also needs a Friday for the Bundeswehr's future elicits bafflement followed by disbelief. The breaking of the Bundeswehr happened under 15 years of rule by Merkel and her Christian Democrats. Nothing will change until after the September 2021 election and if, as will likely be the case, any mix of the SPD, the Greens or the former East German communist Left party play a role in the next government, things will get worse. The curious suggestion of Greens co-leader Annalena Baerbock is that Germany should not meet NATO's defence spending goal but at the same time must “strengthen European sovereignty.”¹⁶ She's a member of what Charles Grant identifies as the club of German politicians “who talk about Europe taking more responsibility for its own

security and then refuse to vote for more defence spending.¹⁷ The harsh conclusion is that there's little chance German military spending will rise to needed levels. This, more than anything else, should alarm the German people and spark deep misgivings among Germany's friends and allies.

- There is widespread ignorance of how dependent Germany remains on US armed forces and intelligence services for its safety and security. Almost 50 percent of Germans want the number of US troops in Germany reduced¹⁸ and 51 percent say Germany and Europe should become more independent from the US.¹⁹ Germans almost universally fail to ask the most basic question: 'Why are US troops here?' If they did, they'd get the answer, 'Because there's a threat to NATO member states from Russia and from Chinese authoritarianism's use of economic power as a weapon'²⁰ – as Merkel herself has indirectly admitted²¹. So, if US troops leave there's a vacuum. The logical follow-up question would be 'Who fills the vacuum? But since nobody in Germany asks these questions, nobody admits there'd be a vacuum and then explains how it will be filled. The problem with Germany is that there's no military-security-political ethos. In London or in Paris the question would be: How do we defend Europe? In Berlin, there's aimless wandering around with lots of process and hand-wringing but no geostrategic compass.

- Anti-Americanism has long been a potent force in Germany and entire books have been written about it. "Ami Go Home," is a slogan passed on since the 1950s. That a prize-winning reporter for the magazine *Der Spiegel* could get away with making up cliché-ridden, hateful stories about the US for years²² raises questions about the nation's media culture. The US is too often treated by Germans like the man sitting over a dunk tank at a Wisconsin county fair. You can hit the target with a ball so he looks a fool and falls into the water – and then wander off to enjoy the rest of the fair. Germans endlessly criticize the US but still want to earn money on Wall Street and visit Florida or the Grand Canyon.
- Germans, even at the highest levels, remain under illusion and error when they look at Russia. Exhibit No. 1 is Chancellor Merkel who for years has claimed that the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, running from Russia to Germany under the Baltic Sea, is just a business deal. Sorry, Chancellor: with Russia (or China or Iran) there can be no separation of business from geopolitics. Exhibit No. 2 is former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder who is chairman of the board of directors of Nord Stream 2 and pals around with Vladimir Putin, whom he calls a "flawless democrat." That Poland and the Baltic states fiercely oppose Nord Stream 2 is of fleeting interest to German leaders.

Berlin's stance on the pipeline has a whiff of then French President Jacques Chirac who derided Central and East European countries for missing a chance "to shut up."²³ Even the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny seemingly isn't changing the business-is-just-business doctrine. To be sure, there are striking exceptions to this stance. German military leadership of NATO troops in Lithuania shows that Berlin doesn't always view its smaller, eastern neighbours as flyover country on the way to Moscow.

- China is where Germans most fear the idea of looking at trade from a geopolitical perspective. China, in popular imagination, is the country where Germany sells BMWs, Mercedes and its world-beating machines. Merkel's forbearance regarding Chinese technology for German 5G mobile networks²⁴ is the same side of this coin. It's also a wedge in the transatlantic alliance.²⁵ Merkel's ramming through of an EU-China investment agreement at the end of last year is "a geopolitical gift to Beijing and a slap in the face to an incoming Biden administration," says Noah Barkin, a Berlin-based analyst at the Rhodium Group.²⁶ There's scant realization of the historic and fateful choice Berlin might have to make between the US and China amid worsening Sino-American ties or even the most limited military standoff. Some 82 percent of Germans say their country should stay "neutral" not regarding a possible US-

China hot war but rather merely in a "new US-Chinese cold war."²⁷ Most Germans no longer read the Prussian philosopher of war, Carl von Clausewitz. If they did, they'd realize that war is different from everything else and war changes everything.²⁸ If there's a conflict between China and the US in which American soldiers die and Germans think that Siemens and Audi can go on exporting to China it will be the end of the US security guarantee for Europe. The idea that Germans or Europeans don't have to take sides in a US-China standoff is a dangerous fallacy.²⁹

- Germans may not be pacifists but the almost automatic response to any international crisis is: "A military option is not the solution." This may be true most of the time, however, Germans fail to understand how military strength can make diplomacy more effective. The prospect of hard power triggers a collective nervous breakdown rather than being viewed as a tool of statecraft. In private, German officials marvel at the clout provided by Bundeswehr foreign deployments. "You wouldn't believe how carefully Baltic governments listen to us when our Luftwaffe is stationed there," one official told me.
- Strategic frivolity is in abundance with regard to Germany's intelligence services. Their work is widely seen as dishonourable and immoral. There's little realization that a country of Germany's size and importance needs its own

spies and will be spied on, including by its allies. Allegations that Merkel's mobile phone was listened to by the US caused nationwide moral outrage. A more useful response would have been a few billion euros more for the BND intelligence service to prevent this ever happening again. In contrast, there is little public outrage over a Russian cyberattack on the German Bundestag.³⁰

- Germany may be one of the most successful trading nations in the world yet the economic importance of "Made in Germany," free trade and globalization for the nation's prosperity is hideously unrecognized and apparently not taught in school. Even a new Tesla plant being built outside Berlin triggered protests and legal action that repeatedly delayed its construction. There were bigger protests against the now defunct EU-US free trade agreement (TTIP). Regarding trade, a spoiled and sated society is unable to comprehend the foundation of its success.
- Related to this, Germans are oblivious to the fact that their business model: exports, is totally dependent on the US given that 90 percent of world trade goes by ship and the US guards the global seaways.
- What follows is a failure to understand that keeping Germany fit as an economic powerhouse is intensely important for the success of the EU. Chancellor Schröder committed political suicide with his hugely successful Agenda 2010 economic reforms. Merkel not only lacks the courage to continue Schröder's reforms, she's chipped away at them, raising taxes, social benefits and energy costs. Germany now has almost the most expensive electricity in Europe, mind-numbing corporate regulation and some of the highest taxes in the world. Holding the EU together is going to take a lot of money. Only a rich Germany with dynamic economic growth can shoulder the cost.

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- Germans massively underestimate the cost to the EU of losing the UK. The quaint habit Germans have of referring to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as merely “die Engländer” may be part of the reason. Germans are truly saddened by Brexit but they overlook the impact of a big, like-minded nation exiting the European project: a military nuclear power with battle-hardened combat troops; a member of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing club (with the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand); a permanent member of the UN Security Council; a democracy and bureaucracy with centuries of experience; a big free-trading nation (that helped Berlin counter Paris); and the country with some of Europe’s best diplomatic and intelligence services. Minus the UK, the European Union will be poorer and diminished. Germany urgently needs to start thinking more like France does about filling the capabilities and leadership gap.
- Germans do not understand the continued need of nuclear deterrence. They do not grasp that NATO is a nuclear alliance; that their own national security policy is built on deterrence and that the US nuclear umbrella is the ultimate security guarantee for NATO member states. Germans, including many Social Democrats, want the US to remove nuclear weapons stationed in Germany. Little consideration is given to how a Germany, decoupled from American nuclear weapons, could respond to Russian nuclear blackmail.

All this strategic frivolity has been fine as long as Germans are being watched over by the US and sleep safely in their beds because rough American men and women stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would harm them. Yet many in Germany ridicule the very idea that the US has kept the peace. Germany’s default solution to anti-US and anti-NATO sentiment is that European security will be done by Europeans. The latest scheme from the SPD calls for troops to be put under command of the European Commission.³¹

This is absurd. Security won't come from the EU. With the departure of the United Kingdom, the EU has lost one of its few serious armed forces. A bigger defence role for Europe is, as the Americans would say, the dog that's refused to hunt since the 1950s. No matter how many fancy-sounding acronyms EU leaders coin about defence cooperation, they can't paper over the undersized militaries, the lack of inter-operability and the dire condition of most national armed forces. France, the only remaining EU nuclear power, is the lone member state with a serious military that can be deployed far afield in real combat situations.³²

Yet Europe exists in a tough neighbourhood where Russia is taking territory by force; China is playing divide and rule and buying its way into creating European client states; Turkey and Hungary agitate over lands they lost after World War I; Russia and others destabilize via disinformation and cyber-attacks; parts of North Africa and the Middle East become failed states; Africa's Sahel becomes a centre for Islamist extremists; and Iran, with missiles that can strike Europe, seemingly continues moves to develop nuclear weapons.

The EU, rather than unifying its member states to face these dangers, has driven them apart with divisions on almost everything including the euro, migration, borders, how to deal with Russia and China and the scope of relations with the US. Even agreement on what to do about Europe's last dictator in Belarus was almost beyond the EU. The European Union is splitting

between north and south, east and west and is stumbling and hesitant over confronting Poland and Hungary on rule of law and Romania and Bulgaria on corruption.³³ This said, the EU indisputably does have unity and clout on trade, regulatory and competition policy— all of which matter on the global stage.

Germany is the one country that could hold the post-Brexit EU together and powerfully lead it using its vast financial means as a nation prepared to pay more and compromise earlier for the good of Europe. There is the oft-stated German self-interest in the success of the EU because it's a huge market for German exports. Yet there's a darker side: If the EU falls apart then Germany walks alone. But Germany is too big to walk alone in Europe.

To make the EU succeed, Germany needs to jettison its strategic frivolity. Germany has to finally accept that it can be a big force in world politics and face up to using its power in pursuit of national and European interests. It needs to stop "deploring," "condemning," "expressing concern" or just endlessly talking about problems. Berlin needs hard-nosed, concrete goals and above all an approach of "how do we fix it" to dealing with the world as it is. In a word: action.

Berlin needs a compelling vision for Europe to win over German voters. Chancellor Merkel failed to seize upon French President Emmanuel Macron's 2017 Sorbonne speech on building a more robust EU. Merkel could have backed Macron's broad thrust while making it clear his vision of "European sovereignty" and strategic

autonomy doesn't correspond with German Atlanticism and Westbindung—the post-1945 political and military binding of Germany to the Western powers forged by Chancellor Konrad Adenauer.

It took three years before German Defence Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer argued that Europe still needs the US for its defence. (And she did so only after announcing her resignation as Christian Democratic Union party leader and giving up her bid to become chancellor.) This drew a withering put-down from President Macron who dismissed her remarks as “a historical misinterpretation” with which “I profoundly disagree.” In a bid to drive a French wedge into the German cabinet, he added that he believed Chancellor Merkel backed him.³⁴

AKK, as the German defence minister is known, doubled down in a keynote address at the Bundeswehr University in Hamburg.³⁵ She refuted Macron by saying that without US conventional and nuclear weapons Europe couldn't defend itself. She criticized Macron's idea of “strategic autonomy” as feeding illusions that Europe can safely exist without a US-led NATO while stressing that Europeans must do more for their defence to remain a serious partner for Washington and so ensure American soldiers stay in Europe.

AKK may be right but where's the rest of the German government? Years after Macron's speech and his latest remarks, where is Merkel's answer?

Spurred by the COVID-19 crisis, Germany's backing of EU-backed bonds is a start but not the reply that Macron is

seeking or which Europe needs. In fact, fire-hosing vast amounts of money into EU states, without a convincing and strategic vision, may ultimately drive Europe apart. The German media is raising doubts on how Italy will spend the billions it's getting³⁶ and Merkel's support for aid to deeply corrupt Bulgaria might lead to a backlash against more EU integration.³⁷

Germany's equivocating shows how Germans still have trouble with what President George H.W. Bush called “the vision thing.” German leaders too often prefer to react to proposals from others rather than taking the lead. Berlin is stuck in the rut of former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt who said: “People with visions should go to the doctor.” (Though Schmidt, it should be noted, did have some visions, as in being a father of NATO's Double-Track Decision.)

It doesn't have to be this way.

Germans are often at their best when facing a crisis. The pandemic has shown this yet again. It's shown that most Germans want a steady hand for political leadership and they are ready to face tough realities and restrictions for the good of their neighbours, their nation and for Europe. The German people are willing to look at the world as it is rather than stick their heads in the sand. But they need leaders with the political courage to bluntly explain what the big picture problems are; how they impact on German and European interests; and what Germany must do to deal with them. They need leaders that don't merely describe or deplore a problem or promise a painless, easy way out—but rather those

who say what has to be done.

Germany desperately needs a grand strategy debate about where Berlin wants to be in Europe in the coming two decades. If that debate isn't led by the chancellery then it needs to come from the Bundestag, from the country's expanding think tank community, the universities and citizen fora. It must also come from the media which needs to focus on news with context and policy rather than getting lost in the weeds of identity politics, process or the latest social media outrage.³⁸

"The direction the continent will choose depends on Germany," says former Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius.³⁹

The 30 years after German reunification have been among the best in Germany's history – a Golden Age of Security.

Pace to Yeats, the German center of Europe must hold. Unless Berlin provides enlightened, visionary and powerful leadership, things will fall apart and the coming 30 years will be far less happy for Germany and for Europe. ■

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In the past six decades, the four pillars of Germany's post-World War II security model were built and expanded: NATO, the European Union, trans-Atlanticism and free trade. This gave Germans their longest period of peace, making them fantastically rich as the world's fourth biggest economy. Can Germany's view of itself as a 'big Switzerland' be sustained? Leon Mangasarian argues not. The Biden presidency is providing Germans with a false sense of security, one which means that Germany will fail to build the appropriate policies and NATO alliances Germany desperately needs in order to build a grand strategy of its place in Europe. If that debate is not led by the chancellor then it needs to come from the Bundestag, from the country's expanding think tank community, the universities and citizen fora.

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